

Last Words

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****A/N:**** I wasn't going to re-post this one, but as I re-read it, I realised I quite liked it after all. Un-beta'd, as the original was. First posted May 2014 – the third in a series of four stories featuring Mike Ayala. (The previous two are 'Down Time' and 'Observations'.)

****Original A/N:**** This was a self-imposed challenge. I thought I'd see if I could write a short in the 1½ hours of train journey that I had yesterday, fuelled by the two glasses of wine I had over lunch and the mix-list recently given me by a friend. I got as far as the word 'sickbay', so I nearly managed it. The rest (and a little bit of tidying) I finished this morning. Hope you found something interesting in it!

_And the things that keep us apart _

_keep me alive _

_And the things that keep me alive _

_keep me alone _

This is the Thing – Fink

* * *

><p>It was supposed to be a standard survey mission. Nothing fancy, no stress. It was just a moon, orbiting a larger uninhabited planet,

the third in a system of five circling a dying sun. Long-range sensors had suggested there might be elements that could be adapted for use with Voyager's long-suffering and overworked systems. There was hardly even much of an atmosphere, which bred foliage inedible for any of _Voyager_'s crew â€" which was just as well, as it looked and smelled pretty unappealing, too. Not the place you'd want to stop for a prolonged period, put it that way. Still, that wasn't going to be a problem. After all, the only thing the away team had to do was take a few soil samples and do some close-quarters scans inside the cave systems they'd detected from orbit.

Piece of cake, right?

Yeah, thought Ayala, _famous last words._

"Incoming!" he yelled, his ears picking up the tell-tale screech of a tracer. It whistled in their direction. Mike saw a glint in the air, something like a flash of silver. It was coming right at them.

"Fall back!" Janeway yelled, beside him. "Ayala-

The first tracer hit, landing a scant metre or so in front of their position. They had the rock to shield them, but the blast still tore vicious chunks out of the edges of their hiding place. Shrapnel ripped outwards, splinters of rock striking the walls of the tunnel in which they'd been pinned. The shards that hit at too oblique an angle to embed themselves ricocheted off the rock like fresh bullets until the air was full of lethal needles of stone. Ayala heard Ensign Granger scream as one caught him in the neck. Mike turned in time to see the spray of blood arc into the air, striking the captain full in the face. She caught the man as he fell, grabbing his hand and forcing it up to clamp it his wound.

"Hold on, Ensign," she yelled. "That's an order!"

"Incoming!" Ayala yelled again. He and Janeway grabbed Granger â€" one arm each, weapons in opposite hands â€" and dragged him backwards, still bleeding as he tried to staunch the flow. Janeway hefted her phaser rifle and fired a shot in the direction of the attack.

The second tracer â€" or whatever the hell the alien equivalent was â€" skimmed the top of the rock and smashed into the cave above their heads. He saw Janeway's mouth moving, but the order was drowned out by the noise. Ayala followed her lead instead, keeping his head down and running with her, Granger between them like a rag doll. Ayala thought Janeway's plan was to go as far into the cave system as possible. What else were they supposed to do? Between them they had their standard-issue phasers, three phaser rifles, and a shuttle that was way too far away. Whoever it was who wanted them dead had a whole lot more firepower than that and they were _not_ happy.

Turned out, the Captain had other plans. They reached a fork in the tunnels and Ayala expected to take the one that led them deeper. Instead, Janeway slewed around, ducking towards the second, the one that they'd used to enter the system earlier. The one that would lead back up to the surface they'd just managed to escape from.

"_Voyager_ won't be able to read us down there," she barked, reading

his mind. "We have to stay on the surface or they'll never pick us up."

Granger's hand came away from his neck, blood free to flow again. Ayala saw the Ensign's head loll, his eyes had rolled so far back in his sockets that they were pure white.

"Captain!"

They stopped, lowering the Ensign to the ground. She left him to deal with the wounded man, skipping back against the wall and raising the rifle again. The noises of alien weapon fire echoed closer and closer.

"Make it quick, Lieutenant!"

Ayala looked up. "He's gone."

She met his eyes, something soft replacing something hard for a fraction of a second. Then the flint edge returned "strong, sharp.

"We'll come back if we can. Move."

Ayala nodded, picking up Granger's weapon and following her lead. They moved quickly up the tunnel, emerging east of the point where they had been attacked. Janeway led him out, ducking an immediate volley of fire from some new weapon in the enemy's arsenal. This one was an energy weapon that scorched everything it hit. They crashed deeper into the foliage until it was true forest, alien leaves a fading from green to purple, scented like something already rotten, reeking like death. Still the attack kept on, burning the air around them as they ran, breathing hard and out of luck. They were never going to make it to the shuttle.

Janeway slammed her hand down on her combadge. "Janeway to _Sacajawea_. Relay override order, authorisation Janeway-Lamda-One. Hail _Voyager_. Distress call Alpha."

The tinny voice of _Sacajawea_'s computer acknowledging the order was drowned out by the blast of an alien weapon burning the air between them. Ayala saw it strike the Captain in the back, catching her mid-stride and spinning her around. She smashed sideways into a tree, blood flying, hitting the ground heavier than a rock, face down and deathly still.

"Captain!" He dived to avoid another blast, crashing down next to her.

He thought she was already dead. Her face was greying fast, blood pumping through the ugly hole the hit had burned into her. Mike looked up, the sounds of the enemy so close that he thought they were already on him. There was no time to check her pulse. He dropped Granger's phaser rifle and used both arms to lift her, dragging Janeway over his shoulder in a fireman's lift that left her blood seeping down into his uniform. He ran, stumbling and erratic, looking for cover "any cover at all, anything that might give him some kind of respite.

He zigzagged, avoiding a straight line in the hope of confusing

whatever was behind him. Janeway was slight, but she still had weight. Ayala tired rapidly, the adrenaline fast turning to lead in his veins. Sweat blinded him, stinging his eyes and blurring his vision.

Mike fell, crashing to his knees and narrowly avoiding smashing her head on the downed tree he'd stumbled against.

It was then that he saw it. The tree was hollow, rotten as the stench of this whole damned place. Ayala didn't even hesitate. He scrambled inside, dragging Janeway with him, keeping her face down and praying that the dark, sucking mulch would disguise the trail left by her blood.

By some miracle, she was breathing. It was shallow and sickly, but it was there. Ayala undid his jacket, ripping it off his shoulders and pressing it to her wound as hard as he dared, trying to calm his own breathing. He turned her over, using her own weight to seal the makeshift bandage against her injury. The Captain muttered something, incoherent with pain.

Sounds reached him from outside. They came through the forest like echoes seeping from a nightmare, rushing closer. When they reached their hiding place Ayala had to put his hand over the Captain's mouth to stifle another moan. For a moment he thought they were done for, but the sounds passed on, moving on through the trees over their heads, still firing.

"Captain," he whispered, once he was sure they had gone. "Can you hear me?"

She moved her head, opening her eyes. Ayala could tell Janeway was trying to concentrate, struggling to focus. He saw the blur of pain hovering over her.

"Lieutenant?"

"Hold on, Captain. _Voyager_'s on her way. The doc'll get you fixed up in no time."

Janeway nodded painfully, "â€|hostiles?" she managed.

"We're safe for now," he told her, with more confidence than he felt. "And once the ship gets hereâ€|"

She nodded, closing her eyes again. A second later she screwed up her face in a frown. "Câ€|cold," she whispered. "Can'tâ€| feelâ€| fâ€|fingersâ€|legsâ€|"

Ayala struggled not to panic. He could see her fading before his eyes, her skin almost translucent in the faint light breaking through the fractured tree bark.

"Hold on," he told her, "Please, Captain, you've got to hold onâ€|"

"Ayala," she said. "Needâ€| need you to do something for meâ€|"

He shifted over her. The blood just kept coming. He could see it, running out from under her, coating the dead tree, the toes of his

boots, the rest of her uniform. "Of course, Captain. Anything."

She forced her hand to move, lifting it enough to grip his arm. "You and Chakotay â€" you're close."

He looked at her. Janeway's eyes were fixed on his â€" clouded, but present. He swallowed. "Yeah," he said.

"Tell himâ€¦ tell him he can do it," she whispered. "Tell him he can get the crew home. Tell him â€" I bâ€¦believe in him. I always have. I know he canâ€¦ getâ€¦ themâ€¦"

The Captain faded out completely. Ayala grabbed her hand as it slipped from his arm, cupping it in both of his. She was cold, so cold. Cold as death.

"Don't go," he told her. "Captain, hold on. _Voyager_ can't be far away. Chakotay will get here. They're coming for us. You've got to hold on."

She opened her eyes again, but he could tell she was blind. The blue had changed, somehow. It was the blue of a dying sky, the hopeless light of an atmosphere lost amid the throes of a sun gone supernova.

"Tâ€¦tell him I'm sorry," she said, her voice so thin it almost wasn't there at all. "Tell himâ€¦ tell him that I wishâ€¦ That I should haveâ€¦"

Ayala shook his head. "Ma'amâ€¦"

"Tell him," she whispered. "Please. I don'tâ€¦ I can'tâ€¦"

He squeezed her hand. "He loves you. So much."

She smiled, blood on her lips, eyes closing. "That's whatâ€¦_keepsâ€¦ meâ€¦ alâ€¦_"

Janeway died before she finished that sentence. Thirty seconds later, Ayala felt the transporter grip them both, and the next thing he knew, he was in sickbay.

The Doc brought her back. They were too late to save Granger, but the hologram did battle over the Captain's body as if all of time and space depended on it. It was messy, it was long, it was far from easy, but they brought her back.

Ayala stayed in sickbay. He should have been at his post, but it was all hands to battle stations to get them out of there, and the Doctor was busy so there was no one to clear him for duty. He watched the Doc work beyond the forcefield at the other end of sickbay as he pulled Janeway back from beyond the brink.

The red alert faded as they jumped to warp. There was no point in fighting. Whoever the aggressors were had claimed that moon for themselves, and asking questions was pointless if they were so willing to shoot first. They retrieved Granger's body and got the hell out of there.

Five minutes later, Chakotay appeared in Sickbay. He looked ashen,

eyes fixed on the patient and the Doctor still hovering over her. They had her back, but only just.

Ayala moved to stand beside his friend. He didn't say anything. Just wanted to lend some support. They'd stood beside each other like this at many sickbeds, back when Chakotay had been Captain and Ayala had been his second.

"Thanks," Chakotay said, eventually. "Thanks for keeping herâ€|" he was going to say 'alive', but didn't. After all, she hadn't been. Ayala let it drift for a moment.

"Look â€" Chakotayâ€|" he began, "Out there. When she wasâ€| fading outâ€|"

The first officer shook his head. "Don't."

"She wanted you to know some things," said Ayala.

"No," Chakotay turned to look at him. "Ayala, _don't_."

"Important stuff, Chakotay. Stuff you should hear."

His friend held up his hand. "Stop."

Ayala was suddenly frustrated "Why? Why won't you hear it?"

"Because she thought she was a dead woman. She _was _a dead woman."

"So?"

"So, I know her, Ayalaâ€|"

Mike snorted. "Sure about that?"

"â€|and whatever she said while she was dying â€" she wouldn't want it heard if she lived. And she's going to live. She's _going to _live_. So don't. I don't want to hear it. She wouldn't _want_ me to hear it. Whatever it was. Good or bad. Not when she's going to have to look me in the eye again sometime soon."

Ayala said nothing for a moment, and then: "You're an idiot, you know that?"

Chakotay shrugged.

Mike thought about walking away. He really did. But sometimes he could be just as stubborn as the big man standing silently beside him.

"She loves you."

Chakotay looked at him. "What did I just say?"

"She didn't say it. Not in those words. So technically I'm not disobeying your ridiculous order." Then Mike did walk away. He'd go back to his quarters, he figured. Have a sonic shower, get rid of this uniform, crusted hard with Janeway's lost blood. The Doc could call him back when he was done with the Captain.

"You two deserve each other," he added, from the doorway. "In every sense of the words."

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